

# Marx for Medievalists: Rethinking Feudalism and Historicism in *Capital*

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*This article assesses the value of Marx's Capital for medieval historians and literary historicists. The author objects to a widespread interpretation of the Marxian concept of feudal exploitation on the grounds that it introduces an anachronistic notion of ownership. He argues that an approach to historicism closer to that pursued by Marx in Capital would permit more productive scholarly work on medieval history and social justice. He also argues that Capital raises questions about the value of conventional historicism similar to those that are presently of concern to many medievalists.*

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By participating in this *Capital* reading group I wanted to answer the following question: Is there any value for graduate students in literature, and for medievalists in particular, in a return to Marx's text? Most graduate students attain some familiarity with Marxist approaches through courses designed to introduce methods in literary study that are now seen as uncontroversial common currency.<sup>1</sup> However, I found an almost total lack of correspondence between the familiar summaries from graduate courses and the methods actually on display in *Capital*. I found reading *Capital* to be valuable, first, to question the adequacy of the usual mediations of Marxism in historical study, and second (and more interestingly), to challenge historicism itself, in a way that corresponds rather closely to some seemingly cutting-edge proposals by medievalists in recent debates over the nature of historicism. To set up this reenvisioning of historicism, I want to begin by comparing how a problem with Marx's interpretation of feudalism and feudal exploitation is manifested in two influential medievalists' accounts of Marxism.

A 2004 special issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, entitled "The Marxist Premodern" and intended to revitalize Marxist approaches for medievalists, included a long essay by the historian Stephen Rigby, which presents itself as an authoritative taking stock of the current value of Marx and Engels's

1. "Such strategies as Marxist criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, and deconstruction continue to be practised, but to a large extent their values have been assimilated into the general critical vocabulary" (Raybin 2007, 9).

intellectual legacy.<sup>2</sup> Characteristically for an “analytic” Marxist, Rigby rejects Marx’s politics and philosophy, finding in his historical methodology (“historical materialism”) the only value of Marxism, which helps us to understand medieval history by directing our attention to such factors as the class struggle and the development of the productive forces. For Rigby the goal of this methodology, in the case of medievalists, should be an accurate causal account of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, especially on the longstanding question of which of these two factors was the “prime mover.” The “prime mover” debate presupposes some hierarchy of causes, meaning the attribution of some greater significance to one of the two factors or another factor such as monetization, trade, and so on. Since he finds (predictably enough) that no one cause can be shown to be empirically primary, Rigby rejects G. A. Cohen’s “primacy thesis” and replaces it with an account of “explanatory pluralism” (2004, 512). The near infinite plurality of explanatory factors that can be incorporated in Marxist methodology makes Marxist historicism easily assimilable into mainstream historiography, in his view (513).

Yet this move threatens to destroy the specificity of a Marxist approach. In fact, Rigby rejects Marx’s very notion of exploitation as subjective and thus unhistorical—partly due to the possibility of interpreting the “protection” provided by feudal lords to their serfs as a form of “payment”:

Paradoxically, if one accepted the legitimacy of private property rights, one could say that it was the peasants who “exploited” their landlords in the sense that their customary conditions of tenure prevented their lords from obtaining the full economic return from their landed property. In other words, far from exploitation having an objective existence ... the perception—or, it should also be stressed, the denial—of its existence is dependent upon our own subjective moral and political judgments. (2004, 507)

But on what basis Rigby distinguishes “objective” from “subjective” aspects of historical knowledge remains unclear throughout his essay. He reveals here that the price of rejecting Marx’s “revolutionary outlook” (473) while attempting to retain a “Marxist” historicism is high indeed: it requires asserting a distinctly old-fashioned subject/object distinction which (as a generation of historiographical theory has taught us) can finally only make historical causality incoherent. The clash of assumptions between Rigby’s essay and the editors’ introduction to this special volume, which presents a perspective informed by Continental philosophies more familiar to literary critics, goes unsigned.<sup>3</sup>

2. For medievalists, Rigby’s view of Marxism seems to have dominated the first decade of the twenty-first century. In addition to the 2004 article, he edited Blackwell’s *Companion to Britain in the Later Middle Ages* (2003) and contributed chapters on social and economic history to Horrox and Ormrod (2006) and Brown (2007).

3. This conflict would be unnoticed by readers not already aware of the distinction between analytic and dialectical Marxism, making the volume somewhat problematic for literary scholars to assimilate. See Chance (1999) for an indication of the problems that may arise from this type of historicization of literature.

Ever since the decline of New Criticism in literary studies, most literary scholars have accepted that there is no sharp subject/object distinction between the scholar and what he or she studies, and this implies that no work of literature (or of interpretation) can be totally apolitical. Lee Patterson's 1987 book *Negotiating the Past*, which has perhaps not been surpassed as an elucidation of literary historicism and its problems for medievalists, follows this view. Patterson draws on post-"linguistic turn" Marxists like Raymond Williams and Fredric Jameson in pursuit of a Marxist historicism that is nonreductionist and politically engaged. For him, this engagement follows almost necessarily from the Marxist concept of totality, which implies that all parts of the social whole are interconnected and bound up with ideology, including the critic him- or herself, who is inescapably political. However, the view of society as an interconnected totality has its price. To put it briefly: if all historical evidence is finally in some way textual, and if all texts are equally classified as "ideology," including Marxist texts, then the critic is left with no way of producing a critical perspective on class hegemony or class struggle. For Raymond Williams it is only one's own experience, the "historical experience of class domination," that allows the historian to speak from a critical position. Patterson finally agrees with Williams, asserting that "[t]here is no alternative: either one recognizes class domination as the central fact of historical life or one does not" (1987, 57).

Patterson prefers that we *would* recognize this, of course. But his framing of this either/or alternative corresponds almost exactly to Rigby's: "In practice, whether or not we regard the payment of rent for land as 'exploitative' is likely to depend upon whether or not we accept private property rights as legitimate" (Rigby 2004, 507). Although Rigby wants a pure, objective Marxist historicism and Patterson wants an engaged one, both arrive at the conclusion that a specifically Marxist historicism necessarily hinges on an ultimately subjective "belief" in exploitation (or, conversely, in property rights as we know them). This makes Marx's political framework as irrelevant to scholarly work as, for example, belief in God. Readers of Patterson must decide for themselves whether they have experienced "enough" exploitation to become "engaged" in supporting social justice. In all likelihood they will not so decide: as Marx points out, exploitation is "mystified" in capitalist society (i.e., not visible as experience), which is why theory is necessary in the first place. The either/or alternative automatically slips back into the disengaged scholarship that Patterson began by criticizing, and historicism can proceed as before.

In what follows, I want to explore why Marx's methods in *Capital* pose a stronger challenge to ordinary historicism than this way of putting the question makes it appear. I agree that, in order to remain engaged with present concerns as well as distinctively Marxist ones, the notion of exploitation must remain a focal point of historical explanation. However, as the above examples show, this concept causes problems. Does Marx really propose such a stark decision about exploitation? Or is there a way to construct an account of exploitation and property that provides a better basis for making this decision? Can this dilemma be resolved by a return to the text of *Capital*? My answer is both no and yes. No, in the sense that *Capital* presents its own aporias on the historical existence of exploitation. Yes, in the sense that a return to *Capital* reveals two things: (1) how little Marx's method corresponds to that

of familiar “Marxist” historicists, and (2) that attending to the ways *Capital* problematizes historicism may provide new directions out of the dilemma.

Rigby and Patterson take exploitation to be primarily a matter of lords’ ownership of property, which entitled them to rents and seigneurial power over the peasantry. Our sense of who owns what is likely to be a major component of any historical narrative (class-based or not), but the concept of ownership itself is, like all other economic concepts, historically constituted. It can be shown that Marxist historicism has tended to treat this concept relatively uncritically. This has caused difficulties in applying Marx’s concept of feudalism without anachronism. It also tends to prevent us from seeing any possible connection between medieval and modern exploitation, rendering the Middle Ages irrelevant for any scholarship taking a critical political perspective. First, I want to outline the relationship of feudalism to ownership in Marx’s argument. Then, I will suggest that medievalists are surprisingly well positioned for rethinking Marxian historicism, and that our period may provide excellent resources for the critical history of economic formations.

### Feudalism, Ownership, Exploitation

In Marx’s analysis, for capitalism to function, labor must be sold as a commodity in the realm of “equals” confronting each other. The only property the laborer is assumed to own is his labor power, and the capitalist owns the means of production (a factory, for example). The laborer “must constantly treat his labour-power as his own property, his own commodity, and he can do this only by placing it at the disposal of the buyer, i.e., handing it over to the buyer for him to consume . . . temporarily” (Marx 1990, 271). The capitalist appropriates the worker’s surplus labor, but this “theft” is “mystified” or invisible since, under capitalism, surplus labor and necessary labor are “mingled together” (346) and sold at the same time.

According to Marx, feudalism offers a privileged, demystified model of how this exploitation takes place. It “presents surplus labour in an independent and immediately perceptible form” (345). Under the *corvée* system, the serf works part of the time on his own land, in order to provide the necessary sustenance for himself and his family; part of the time he is forced to work on his lord’s estate, which produces surplus labor for the lord. This arrangement means that, under feudalism, “there is no need for labour and its products to assume a fantastic form different from their *reality* . . . The *corvée* can be measured by time just as well as the labour which produces commodities, but every serf knows that what he expends in the service of his lord is a specific quantity of his *own personal labour-power*” (170; emphasis added). This passage defines the exploitative “reality” that is mystified under capitalism as an essentially feudal exploitation, which is therefore never fully surpassed in the modern period. It is because of its hidden “feudal” truth that modern wage labor can be most easily described in terms of feudal labor.

Such an explanatory model is necessary because, under capitalism, exploitation appears as nothing more than the free exchange of commodities, which,

from a legal standpoint, presupposes nothing beyond the worker's ability to dispose freely of his own capacities, and the money-owner's or commodity-owner's power to dispose freely of the values that belong to him ... hence each individual transaction continues to conform to the laws of commodity exchange, with the capitalist always buying labour-power and the worker always selling it at what we shall assume is its real value. (729)

Yet the worker is exploited, just like the serf, since this exchange of "equivalents" allows the capitalist to appropriate the surplus value produced by the worker's labor.

In order to allow feudalism to illuminate capitalism, and to permit the modern worker to see himself as a kind of unwitting serf, the medieval serf had to be conceived to "own" his "personal labour-power." That is, Marx appears to define feudal exploitation as a violation of the right of self-ownership, thus anachronistically assuming that serfs understand the body as property in essentially the same way as capitalist subjects.<sup>4</sup> But our modern category of self-ownership (including ownership of one's labor and, for that matter, property) as existing apart from obligations to the community is the contingent historical product of a long process of simplification. Ownership in the Middle Ages was primarily understood in terms of land, not commodities. "Owning" land and labor could never be understood simply, as the medieval historian Marc Bloch points out, since

the word ownership, as applied to landed property, would have been almost meaningless ... The tenant who ... ploughs the land and gathers in the crop; his immediate lord, to whom he pays dues, and who, in certain circumstances, can resume possession of the land; the lord of the lord, and so on, right up the feudal scale how many persons are there who can say, each with as much justification as the other, "That is my field!" Even this is an understatement. For the ramifications extended horizontally as well as vertically and account should be taken of the village community, which normally recovered the use of the whole of its agricultural land as soon as it was cleared of crops; of the tenant's family, without whose consent the property could not be alienated; and of the families of the successive lords. (1967, 115-6)

In short, feudal ownership involves contradictory overlapping sovereignties.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the concept of self-ownership, as Janet Coleman has shown, evolved sometime after Locke and had been bound up with communal obligations throughout the medieval period.<sup>6</sup> Modern "absolute" notions of ownership are just as historical as the other economic categories Marx historicizes. Thus, in basing the "reality" of the laborer's ownership on a feudal example, Marx has imposed an anachronistic

4. "[The worker] must be the free proprietor of his own labour-capacity, hence of his person" (Marx 1990, 271).

5. For a more detailed treatment of the historical context, see Katz (1989, 54-9).

6. Coleman notes that the heart of the modern concept "is that self-ownership *excludes any* [enforceable] *duty* to help others" (2006, 127) whereas in the medieval period the concept of right was "theoretically subordinated to obligation—to God, to oneself and to others" (129). For instance, Thomas Aquinas held that "wherever necessity exists, it is permitted to expropriate a surplus held privately by another without being considered a thief ... In extreme necessity a starving man may take what is necessary to free himself from certain death" (Coleman 1988, 623).

understanding of property rights and self-ownership on the serf.<sup>7</sup> “Every serf” did indeed know the difference between working for his family and working for his lord, but neither he nor the lord “owned” anything in the simple, modern, absolute sense.

As it was outlined above, Marx’s theoretical concept of feudalism distorts the historical reality of feudal ownership. For the serf and the worker, Marx speaks of exploitation as if it lies in a violation of property right: “property turns out to be the right, on the part of the capitalist, to appropriate the unpaid labour of others or its product, and the impossibility, on the part of the worker, of appropriating his own product” (730). The worker’s labor power is “sold” to the capitalist and Marx refers to it as the worker’s “own” in some extralegal sense.<sup>8</sup>

Though Marx argues that both serfs and workers should rightfully appropriate the surplus that legally belongs to the exploiting class, he does not provide an unambiguous ground for this extralegal right. In *Capital*’s account of primitive accumulation, this right appears to be a historical one that descends from the time when workers “owned” the means of production (i.e., the time of feudalism) and that was violated during the early modern period of primitive accumulation. But if medievalists allow themselves to be guided by a notion of feudal exploitation based on ownership, this makes the historical appearance of exploitation hinge on the existence of rights that did not yet exist. A property-based notion of feudal exploitation thus smuggles an anachronism into historical analysis (which leads Rigby to reject exploitation altogether).

Marx’s historical analyses in volume 1 of *Capital* certainly *seem* to apply the notion of self-ownership transhistorically, and Marxist historicism has usually followed this way of conceptualizing exploitation.<sup>9</sup> But it may be doubted that Marx himself thought this way, and I argue below that closer attention to Marx’s historical method would lead a consistent Marxist historicism to abandon this principle. In fact, Marx’s statements affirming self-ownership are part of an attempt to show the contradictions within bourgeois right, not an attempt at objective historical analysis. In Marx’s other writings, exploitation is defined in terms of an unjust distribution of the surplus by class, not its possession by workers as property.<sup>10</sup>

As should now be obvious, the question as posed by Rigby and Patterson is incoherent; analyzing whether medieval peasants (or any historical group) were

7. “... however much the feudal trappings might disguise their absolute ownership” (Marx 1990, 877–8).

8. Cf. Marx’s comment that the worker “avoid[s] renouncing his rights of ownership over it” (1990, 271) as well as his remark about the serf’s “own personal” labor power (170).

9. Rigby explicitly follows Cohen in this view of exploitation (2004, 504–7) as does Coleman (2006, 126). Patterson is less precise but seems to define exploitation in terms of power. For a brief survey of, and alternative to, Marxist attempts to define class and exploitation in terms of property and power, see Resnick and Wolff (2006, 118–36).

10. In volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx signals that his critique in terms of self-ownership has subscribed to a principle he does not necessarily hold himself: “Originally the rights of property *seemed* to us to be grounded in a man’s own labour. Some such *assumption* was at least necessary” (1990, 730; emphasis added). For a fuller demonstration that Marx does not speak for the self-ownership principle *in propria persona*, see Levy, who shows that “Marx’s most important statements of distributive justice [in “Critique of the Gotha Program”] directly challenge the self-ownership thesis” (2002, 81).

“exploited” does not come down to a question of being “for or against” property rights unless we know what constitutes ownership in a given period. We should recognize the need to simultaneously historicize conceptual categories like ownership when doing Marxian history. Failing to adequately historicize ownership leaves historians an easy out: if property is an either/or proposition (simply owned or not owned), then the upshot of Marx’s entire argument about exploitation can come down to simple acceptance or rejection. On the other hand, a nonanachronistic account of medieval exploitation can be envisioned that would put medieval thought on distributive justice in dialogue with Marxian accounts of surplus labor.<sup>11</sup> This type of historicization of ownership might help restore historical exploitation to relevance in modern discussions of social justice, as well as open up new avenues toward conceptualizing ownership in the present and future. Marx reveals possible benefits of such a dialogue in volume 3 of *Capital*.

From the standpoint of a higher economic form of society, private ownership of the globe by single individuals will appear quite as absurd as private ownership of one man by another. Even a whole society, a nation, or even all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the globe. They are only its possessors, its usufructuaries [*Nutznießer*], and, like *boni patres familias*, they must hand it down to succeeding generations in an improved condition. (1967, 776)

In this passage Marx momentarily sets aside the notion of modern ownership and suggests that it ought not necessarily be defined as absolute. Marx believed that a “higher economic form of society” would attach conditions to ownership such that it would be subordinate to the good of the social whole. Here he employs a familiar concept in premodern property debates, that of *usufruct*, in order to distinguish between absolute ownership and mere possession.<sup>12</sup> Thus, alternative conceptions of ownership that were normative in the past may be employed in the critique of modern ones.

### What Is Marxist Historicism?

The failure to explore alternative genealogies of ownership stems from a more general problem with academic Marxist historicism. I think this problem becomes apparent when *Capital* is read straight through as an “artistic whole” (to use Marx’s term) rather than being mined for individual clues to Marx’s historical methodology. Nowhere in *Capital* does Marx’s actual method resemble mainstream academic historicism (Marxist or not). *Capital* does not deploy ready-made “Marxist” concepts in order to establish a sound, empirical history, which could then be used as “evidence” in a separate political or theoretical argument. Theory and history

11. Rigby disavows the possibility of such dialogue (2004, 507). The medieval discourse on necessity would be one possible avenue of approach for what I am proposing here; see Green (2007) for one recent discussion of this discourse.

12. This concept of nonabsolute possession within a context of obligation comes from Roman law, but received its most sophisticated development in the medieval period.

proceed together in what has been called a “logico-historical method.”<sup>13</sup> This means that Marx’s exposition characteristically pursues two “histories” at the same time: on the one hand, it presents sequences of events drawn from empirical history; and, on the other hand, it presents sequences drawn from the inner logic of the development of a concept.<sup>14</sup> For example, the opening chapters of *Capital* begin with a conceptual analysis of the commodity and then develop the idea of a universal money form from it. This ideal sequence rigorously integrates the historical evidence Marx presents, regardless of whether money developed in this exact historical sequence. In this way historical evidence is always transforming Marx’s theoretical categories; never remaining static, they are constantly being altered both by history and by Marx’s reflection on his own historical moment. From this perspective, any reading of a cultural process or artifact that simply deploys Marx’s analytical concepts and leaves them unchanged is actually un-Marxian.

This observation about Marx’s historical method is not new, but it is often ignored in accounts that try to assimilate Marxist methods to mainstream historical scholarship. On the contrary, in *Reading Capital*, Louis Althusser argued that Marxism is an “anti-historicism” and that the logico-historical mode of investigation meant that Marx rejected empirical notions of history in favor of viewing history as consisting of multiple heterogeneous temporalities.<sup>15</sup> Entirely different temporal logics are at work in the histories of philosophy, of politics, of economics, of art, and so on, and these different levels can never finally be reconciled in a single time of “history.” Althusser’s particular reading of multiple temporalities in *Capital* has been controversial, but it should be noted that there has recently been a striking convergence of medievalists on exactly this point. Drawing on Theodor Adorno’s work, Maura Nolan has recently called for an “aesthetic” historicism that would allow us to “see how art’s heterogeneity, its multiplicitious temporality, functions across and through epochs and periods . . . [how] the modern needs the medieval in all of its complexity in order to be modern at all” (2004, 571). From a postcolonial perspective, Kathleen Davis has examined “how divisions such as medieval/modern or Middle Ages/Renaissance impose homogeneities that not only mask the existence of ‘modern’ characteristics in the Middle Ages and ‘medieval’ characteristics in modernity, but also . . . occlude minority histories such as those of women and the racially or religiously oppressed” (2008, 3–4). Carolyn Dinshaw (2007) has similarly turned to the idea of “multiple temporalities” as the only way to make sense of the act of writing medieval history in the modern period—which has founded itself upon a rejection of the medieval while still utilizing medieval categories to understand itself.<sup>16</sup> These kinds of reconceptualizations of historicism open the way to seeing the “feudal” not

13. For a recent discussion of Marx’s “logico-historical” method, see Milonakis and Fine (2009, 33–45).

14. Literary critics are familiar with this second kind of sequence. We can think of Lacan’s description of the “mirror stage,” which is not meant to be an empirical description of anyone’s actual development. Likewise Adorno’s “dialectic of enlightenment” describes an ideal, not an empirical, movement of history.

15. See Althusser 1970 (pt. 2, chaps. 4–5).

16. For similar remarks from a psychoanalytic perspective, see Scala (2002).



as an empirical historical period, but instead as a mobile conceptual category that may describe formations of power in other periods as well.<sup>17</sup> Attention to such ways of reading history may allow us to better understand and develop a critique of modernity's repressed medieval foundations, and it suggests at the same time that a return to Marx's *Capital* can still be productive for medievalists (or indeed anyone concerned with historicism).

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17. In similar fashion, by describing it in terms of a “fundamental class process,” Resnick and Wolff argue that “feudalism” best describes the type of labor performed in the household in modern capitalist societies (2006, 159–95).

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